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AUTHOR Medina, Victoria
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ABSTRACT

This paper sets forth guidelines regarding the use of interpreters/translators for use in assessment of students from linguistically and culturally different environments. Training components for such personnel are listed according to general knowledge, cultural knowledge, and specific skills. Limitations of using a third party in the assessment process include variation in interpretations and translation and the time consuming nature of the involvement. Do's and don'ts are offered, and the basic concepts related to the process of interpreting and translating are examined. Typical duties of interpreters (including involvement in parent-school conferences) and translators (including making written idiomatic and literal translations from and into the target language) are listed. Concluding remarks focus on minimum qualifications and the ethics and standards of the position for paraprofessionals. (CL)

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ISSUES REGARDING THE USE OF INTERPRETERS AND TRANSLATORS IN A SCHOOL SETTING

Ms. Victoria Medina, Program Specialist
Los Angeles County Superintendent of Schools

Introduction

Almost half of the state's children come to school with culture and linguistic experiences different from the schools' expectations or preparations. Providing equal educational opportunities within a multilinguistic society would be impossible without bilingual interpreters and translators. However, many of these personnel are untrained for their roles within educational settings. The needs of the schools can lead to successful use of bilingual personnel but cautions and limitations must be observed until they are fully trained.

I. What kinds of needs are there in schools that require the use of interpreters and translators?

School districts have a responsibility to recruit certificated bilingual/bicultural personnel to assess and plan for students from linguistically and culturally different environments. In addition, due process provisions state that parents must give "informed consent" for assessment, educational placement, and planning for their child. Often the parents are not from the English-speaking core culture. Special educators are faced with difficulties in assuring due process for both children and parents. This section will address one short-term remedy aimed at a common sense and practical solution--the use of the interpreters/translators.

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It should be clearly understood that this is not an endorsement of the use of the interpreter and translator as the preferred method for assessment, but rather as a support method. Successful use of paraprofessionals as interpreters and/or translators depends in part on:

1. Careful selection.
2. Being provided with an adequate training program.
3. Monitoring their activities.
4. The educator's own personal commitment to enhance self-awareness of cultural and linguistic biases.

II. What components are necessary for the successful use of interpreters and translators?

MINIMUM TRAINING COMPONENTS

ENTRY LEVEL

1.0. General Knowledge

- 1.1. Basic concepts in interpretation and translation.
- 1.2. Professional ethical conduct.
- 1.3. Role and responsibilities.
- 1.4. Steps in the identification, assessment, and educational programming processes.
- 1.5. Specific terminology related to work assignment.
- 1.6. Paperwork related to work assignment.
- 1.7. Knowledge about the special education school population, (e.g., mental retardation, severe language disorders, learning disabilities, etc.).
- 1.8. Legal requirements and ramifications.
- 1.9. Other.

2.0 Cultural Knowledge: Specific to the school's community.

3.0 Specific Skills.

- 3.1. Style of translating or interpreting.

3.2. Other.

4.0 District Policy.

III. What cautions and limitations should educational staffs be aware of regarding the use of interpreters and translators?

Using interpreters and translators imposes several limitations. In assessment, particularly, we have to be extra careful in accounting for interpreter expertise, bias, possible error, etc. Documentation must be used by an interpreter or translator to "note to what degree the validity of the assessment may have been attenuated."

Some limitations include, but are not limited to:

1. Introducing bias of a third party.
2. Mistakes made in original language or in the interpretation are often charged to the pupil.
3. Formal scores, "To report or not to report, that is the question!" Information obtained through the interpreter is generally better suited for edumetric purposes than for pyschometric documentation.
4. Interpretations and translations - different versions may be obtained from different persons.
5. The process is time consuming - be wary of "Have you got a minute?"
6. The authority figure may often shift to the interpreter by virtue of language bonding. "So who's in charge?"
7. The neutrality issue may arise. "And in this corner..."
8. Transliteration errors.

IV. What are the types of errors made in assessment?

GENERAL DO'S AND DON'TS

Do's

1. Do know the person you will be working with--style, language usage, speed of speaking, etc.
2. Do prepare for each task.

3. Do maintain a relationship of mutual respect and concern.

4. Do ask questions when you do not understand a word, concept, or procedure.

5. Do keep a bilingual dictionary with you at all times and use it.

Don'ts

1. Don't expect to know everything all of the time.

2. Don't assume all tasks are equal.

3. Don't use professional, educational jargon.

4. Don't make clinical judgments.

5. Don't editorialize on what the speakers have said.

V. What are the basic concepts related to the process of interpretating and translating?

The main function of an interpreter and a translator is to make it possible for all participants to communicate with one another despite language and cultural differences. The interpreter and translator facilitate communication.

The aide working as interpreter in the school setting performs oral consecutive interpretations from and into the target language. Some of the more typical duties are the following:

1. Acts as interpreter for school personnel, including but not limited to the administrator, the psychologist, the teacher, the speech specialist, the nurse, the audiologist, the secretary, etc.

2. Interprets during school-parent conferences.

3. Interprets during parent interviews in the home setting (always accompanied by the school person in charge of the interview).

4. Interprets during testing sessions.

5. Administers tests to pupils (only those tests she/he is trained to administer).

6. Keeps records of time spent on assignments. (Optional)

The school translator makes prepared translations and some sight translations from and into the target language. Some of the more typical duties are the following:

1. Acts as translator for school personnel.

2. Makes written idiomatic and literal translations from and into the target language and certifies their accuracy.

3. Keeps and updates a list of terms and concepts that have been translated into the target language (highly desirable).

VI. What are the minimum qualifications for the paraprofessional to assume the tasks of interpreting and/or translating?

1. Maintain high oral fluency in both English and the target language (bilingual).

2. Have above average reading and writing ability in English. She/he should also have reading and writing ability close to or the equivalent to that of an educated native speaker (biliterate).

3. Experience in interpreting and/or translating for a recognized public or private agency is highly desirable.

4. Demonstrate flexibility. This means that the interpreter must be able to handle variations within languages, i.e., different ways of saying the same thing. The interpreter must be able to adjust to different levels of usage--colloquial, idiomatic, highly stylistic and literary. Last, the interpreter must be able to fit into different real-life situations.

VII. What should be the ethics and standards of a paraprofessional interpreter/translator (I/T)?

An aide, like any professional I/T, should have a highly developed sense of intellectual integrity, responsibility and ethical conduct which, in practical terms, means that the I/T:

1. Does not accept assignments/tasks beyond his/her language and/or subject-matter competence. An unskilled or unprepared interpreter or translator may produce wrong or misleading information (e.g., testing a child without being trained to administer that test).

2. Continues the process of self-education and improvement.

3. Brings unsolved problems to the attention of the person she/he is working within the school setting.

4. Respects appointment times and deadlines.

5. Refrains from unseemly or exaggerated claims (e.g., "I test special education pupils.")

6. Abstains from unsolicited criticism of the translation of others.

7. Shares knowledge with other I/T's to help upgrade the performance of all aides doing the same job.

8. Upholds CONFIDENTIALITY regarding pupil records and all information about a pupil and his/her family.

9. Maintains neutrality. Interpreters and translators transmit information from school personnel to parents and/or pupils and vice versa. All that is said or written by either party must be transmitted entirely. The I/T should not change, leave out, or add information. The I/T should not "editorialize" (e.g., give an opinion, evaluation, or judgment). The I/T should always ask herself or himself, "Am I conveying my personal feelings?" "How will I deal with issues that are emotional or sensitive or contrary to what I believe?" Set the right tone and structure by making clear to the parent that the I/T is acting on behalf of the school and will ensure that that all information given by the parent(s) will be shared with the school. This gives the parent the right to avoid saying something to the I/T that the parent would not normally want the school to know.

10. Demonstrates impartiality. The I/T treats all persons in the same way.

11. Interprets and/or translates faithfully the thought, intent, and spirit of the speakers.

12. Exercises self-discipline. Interpreters and translators often work alone or with little or no supervision, but they are often the key to a successful meeting. Interpreting is not easy to monitor, nor are translations easy to certify. Therefore, the effectiveness of an interpreter or translator and adherence to ethics and standards often depend on the integrity, honesty, and self-discipline of the person(s) charged with these heavy responsibilities.

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